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Mexican Springs, N.M.-Area Indian Communities Live Without Electricity

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Jun. 23--MEXICAN SPRINGS, N.M.--In the mountains and on the mesas of the Navajo Nation, children read and silversmiths work by kerosene lantern at night, traveling to neighbors' homes in the day to use their refrigerators during the hot summer months.

"There's a lot of silversmiths, carvers and weavers here," says Michael Atsitty of Mexican Springs. "They like to do most of their work in the evenings."

Atsitty said for Navajos, electricity means being able to work at night, and for children, it means being able to read and study.

"Some of them like to use an open fire, but it's too dry now. They use kerosene lanterns and Coleman lamps. It costs a lot," Atsitty said.

The 700-member community of Mexican Springs, north of Gallup, is just one of the Navajo Nation's 110 communities in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah where remote tribal members live without electricity.

The Navajo and Hopi nations -- which provide coal for power plants to light up much of the Southwest -- lead Indian country in the lack of access to electricity, reports the U.S. Department of Energy.

More than one-third of Navajos, 37 percent, lack access to electricity while high-powered transmission lines tower above them, water is depleted from the aquifer, and tens of millions of pounds of chemical toxins are released into the air each year to produce electricity, say the Energy and the Environmental Protection Agency.

An Energy report shows, the Navajo Reservation accounts for 75 percent of all Indian households on tribal lands not having electricity.

At an Indian Town Hall in Phoenix, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson urged tribes in Arizona and New Mexico to develop their energy resources and pursue "Green Power" -solar, wind and geothermal resources.

On Hopi tribal land in Arizona, 29 percent of homes lack access to electricity, the Energy Department reports.

The Hopi Foundation has been working for more than a decade to promote alternative forms of energy. It has installed more than 50 solar photovoltaic panels in traditional Hopi homes to provide power.

Faithful to the advice of Hopi traditional elders, the foundation struggled to preserve Hopi sovereignty and traditions, while resisting outside intrusion.

Energy reports show that in Indian country 14.2 percent of all homes lack electricity, while in the mainstream America, only 1.4 percent of homes are without electricity. American Indians pay a higher percentage of their incomes for electricity than non-Indians.

American Indians in the Southwest and the

Dakotas have the highest rates of homes without electricity.

On Standing Rock in South Dakota and North Dakota, 18 percent of the people don't have access to electricity. Among the Mescalero Apache in New Mexico, 15 percent lack access to electricity.

In the Phoenix valley, in the Salt River Indian Community, 12 percent lack electricity. Also in Arizona, in the White Mountains at Fort Apache, 9 percent lack access.

Along the Arizona and Mexico border to the south, 8 percent of the Tohono O'odham lack access as do those at Lake Traversie-Sisseton in South Dakota. The list goes on through other parts of the Dakotas, though in smaller percentages.

Oklahoma tribes were reported to have high rates of electrification and pay comparable rates to non-Indian communities while American Indians on tribal lands in Maine, New York and California pay the highest rates for electricity in Indian country.

The energy report also shares some good news.

Four Indian nations in the south and east are capable of providing renewable-based electricity cheaper than the wholesale cost of power sold locally.

Indian nations with untapped resources are: Eastern Cherokee in North Carolina, Alabama and Coushatta in Texas, Coushatta in Louisiana and Mississippi Choctaw.

While the number of American Indians without electricity is staggering, the number of tribal homes without access to natural gas is even higher -- with virtually no one having access in huge pockets of Indian country

In an effort to bring energy to Indian country, Secretary Bill Richardson urged the development

of renewable sources of energy, including central station projects for biomass (organic non-fossil organic materials) on the Navajo Nation in Arizona and Mescalero Apache in New Mexico.

Richardson said wind is also a largely untapped source of renewable energy. Energy funded wind feasibility studies of the Blackfeet and Fort Peck Tribes in Montana and Turtle Mountain (N.D.) Chippewas.

To encourage the use of solar energy in sunny Arizona, Richardson urged the InterTribal Council of Arizona to pledge to install 500 solar systems, thermal, electrical or air, by the year 2010 and become partners in the Coalition Partnership.

On the Navajo Nation, the Energy recently funded photovoltaic projects in the southwestern corner in Dilkon and Teesto, Ariz. These solar generators are capable of providing power for a refrigerator, lights, television, water pump and computer for a family of four.

Computers were a priority when the Energy funded a photovoltaic system for the Seba Dalkai school on the Navajo Nation.

In this area of high unemployment, electricity also translates into income.

"People could work in the evenings if they had electricity," Atsitty said.

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